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TIRLSTONE



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THE RED FOX OF TIRLSTONE

CHAPTER 1.

A Fight Against Odds.—Bad News.

SIR EUSTACE ALLEYNE sat in the great hall of Northmoor Castle, the residence of his old-time friend and comrade, Leofric, the Saxon thane, partaking of the midday meal, while the squires and men-at-arms, who followed in the Saxon's train, were at their places round the great table below the dais.

"So the Red Fox of Tirlstone is out again with his riders," quoth Sir Eustace Alleyne.

He leaned back in the great oak chair, and turned a half-inquiring look upon his companion.

"So says the messenger," replied Leofric the Saxon. "Repeat your story, Bertram, for, of a truth, you spoke in such haste, and with such scant breath, that I did not catch a half of what you said."

Thus appealed to, Bertram the dwarf, a squat, swarthy figure, who was standing bareheaded behind his master's chair, did as he was bidden.

"'Tis but a short story I have to tell," he said; "yet I ween 'tis overlong for those whom it most concerns."

"Prate not," interrupted Leofric testily; "but be brief and to the point."

"Riding, the Red Fox is, without a doubt, an it please, you, master," pursued the dwarf. "Out at dawn from his nest in the hills beyond Tirlstone, riding hot-foot over meadow

and tilth, with a line of dead men to mark his trail—till the homesteads flare at sundown, and the barns lie all in a ruddy glow."

"May evil spirits seize the villainous Norman and all his brood!" cried Leofric fiercely. "For a Norman he is—a recreant knight, 'tis said—who for foul practices was disgraced and banished by King Richard. But instead of quitting the country he hid away among the hills and woods of Tirlstone, and there gathered round him a following of broken men of all sorts—robbers, men-at-arms who care not for fighting unless a chance of plunder lies at the end, and others whose hands have been stained with worse crimes than robbery. And there are whispers abroad that Sir Henwick Beaucerc, the Sheriff of Nottingham, secretly favours the Red Fox, and on condition of leaving him undisturbed as far as possible is not above sharing some of his plunder."

"Can it be that such a villain as he whom you describe is allowed to do his evil will almost unchecked, while gallant men such as Robin Hood and his merry foresters, who are ever ready to help the poor, are hunted down without mercy?" exclaimed Sir Eustace Alleyne.

"There is never a village but knows the shield of the Red Fox," put in Bertram the dwarf—"never a child but has learned to hide when the dastard knight is abroad. An good King Richard were but back again—"

"There would be an

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alteration in many things," interrupted Sir Eustace. "But whence the name Red Fox?"

"A red fox's head is the device he bears upon his shield," answered Leofric. "His real name, as I have heard, is Gaston Malvoisin, but of that I cannot speak with certainty. And indeed, it matters but little. As the Red Fox he is known, and 'tis a fitting name."

Sir Eustace twirled his moustache and lay back in his chair again.

"I would fain see this Red Fox," he said.

At the word, the squires and men-at-arms in the hall leaned forward, eagerly listening.

"Twould not be difficult," mused Leofric the Saxon, "an we go not with too great a company of armed followers. He cares not to make an attack where there is nothing to gain but hard knocks and chance of losing much. But an you and I rode forth unaccompanied, Sir Knight—"

He paused, and a growl of disappointment ran round the hall among the retainers. Leofric rose to his full height and looked down on his men with a grim smile.

"Ye quarrelsome knaves!" he cried. "Can ye not be happy without breaking of heads? And would ye be spoilsports? An the good knight and I went forth with an armed following, we should gain no sight of the Red Fox and his riders. Moreover, I have a mind to see this fellow myself, and it may well be that he will show himself when he finds that there are only two to face, in the hope of gaining a pair of goodly steeds, if nothing else."

"In fair fight?" asked Sir Eustace.

"I should rather say it will be foul," replied the thane. "Fair fighting is not his usual method."

"Well, I am ready," said Sir Eustace.

At the command of Leofric, their steeds were saddled and brought forth into the courtyard. Then they mounted and, crossing the drawbridge, rode away southward over the heather.

The sun was drawing towards the west as Sir Eustace and Leofric crested a ridge of high land and saw the blaze

of purple heather stretching away to the borders of Sherwood Forest on the one hand, and to the hills of Tirlstone on the other. Suddenly, behind them, they heard a snatch of song:

"A knight came out of the wood so green,
Sing hey, ho ho ho, ho ho!
D'ye mark his golden gabardine?
Sing hey for the bow, the bow!"

Leofric drew rein and looked back. Up the hill after them, astride a sturdy mare, came the squat, swarthy figure of Bertram the dwarf, with a great yew stave slung at his back.

"I said we wanted no followers, Bertram!" cried Leofric.

"So ye did, master," growled Bertram.

"Well, knave?" said Leofric angrily.

"Well, sir?" said the dwarf.

"Why do you follow us?"

"I know the Red Fox," growled Bertram, and his eyes flashed fiercely, "and I, too, would see him. My sister's cottage was burnt down a few weeks syne by some of his band, so I have a score to settle."

"Come, then, in Heaven's name!" replied Leofric as he urged his steed onward once more.

Together the trio came to a hamlet that bordered on Tirlstone Wood, and here they got word of the Red Fox from a boy who was playing on the green-sward.

"But an hour agone," he said, in answer to their questions, "I saw them riding along the path that leads through the wood towards the ford over the Don. It may be they are going to camp there for the night, if they are making a long journey to-morrow."

"You are an intelligent lad," said Leofric, tossing the boy a silver-piece. "And when you want employment come up to Northmoor Castle, and I think a place may be found for you."

The lad doffed his cap and thanked the thane with a beaming face, and the cavalcade rode on again.

The dusk of eventide was already settling in the valleys when Leofric and his companions came in sight of the encampment by the river. Floating from the roof of a farmhouse close by was the black banner with the red

fox head, and as he saw that, Sir Eustace loosed his sword in its scabbard and tried the weight of his lance.

But the Red Fox was not to be caught asleep. A sentinel had already given warning of the approach of the two knights and their attendant, and a score of armed men dashed out of the camp to meet them.

"A Red Fox! A Red Fox!" they shouted, that being their war-cry.

Both Leofric and Sir Eustace, without a moment's hesitation, couched lances in rest and rode fiercely at their assailants, while Bertram the dwarf followed close after them, flourishing his heavy yew stave, which was a formidable weapon in his hands.

There was a shock, the ring of steel, a confused shouting, and two of the band were unhorsed and flung to the earth in a cloud of dust. A third was presently rolled over by a hearty crack on the head from Bertram's cudgel.

Sir Eustace Alleyne's lance had been shivered in his grasp, so flinging away the butt he drew his sword and spurred his horse against the next enemy nearest to him. The blow he aimed was so forceful that, although it was not fatal to the man, it sent him reeling from the saddle to the ground, where he lay helpless.

At the same time Leofric tilted at another, and though he did not succeed in unhorsing him, he wounded him so badly that the knave was glad enough to withdraw from the fight.

So far the Red Fox had been little more than a spectator of the affray, which he evidently supposed would be finished off more easily than promised to be the case. But seeing that his men were faring so ill, he rode forward and joined in the struggle, urging and encouraging them with voice and gesture.

The remainder of the band, another half-score at least, now appeared upon the scene, and it seemed likely that Sir Eustace, Leofric, and the dwarf must soon be overcome and made prisoners. But they were suddenly reinforced in a most unexpected manner.

From a thicket close by three men appeared and joined in the fray, taking

side at once with the sorely-beset knights and the dwarf. And such was the newcomers' prowess that they very soon turned the tide of battle in their favour.

Two were dressed in Lincoln green, and the third wore the garb of a priest. The latter was armed with a quarter-staff, the taller of the two foresters with a huge axe, while the other forester, evidently a leader, by the calm and commanding expression of his voice and manner, carried a bow and sheaf of arrows.

Sir Eustace recognised them at once.

"By my faith!" he cried, "'tis Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck. Welcome, bold foresters! Ye come in good time to serve a friend!"

"It would seem so," exclaimed Robin Hood as he fitted a cloth-yard shaft to his bow and shot it with unerring aim against a man who was on the point of striking Leofric down from behind.

In the meantime Little John and Friar Tuck were busy with axe and quarterstaff, and the Red Fox riders reeled back before their fierce onslaught.

"So, ho! the man of peace is among ye!" cried the jovial friar. "Liberty or death! There will be broken crowns this night among the curs who follow the Red Fox!"

Sir Eustace and his companions, having paused a few moments to regain breath, now hurled themselves once more into the thick and din of the conflict.

The Red Fox was down, and his followers reeled, wavered, and broke. Down to the river-bank they were driven, across the spongy marsh-land that bordered the stream, then through the reeds into the soft ooze beyond.

Then, and not till then, Robin Hood suggested that it would be as well to press the fight no further.

"Leave them now," he said; "for if others of their company come up we shall be taken at a disadvantage here."

"We could leave them in no better place," said Friar Tuck, with a hearty laugh, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow. "Up to their necks in mire, many of them."

Sir Eustace and Leofric thanked the gallant outlaws for their timely assistance, and would have had them come up to Northmoor Castle to partake of the good cheer which could be set before them there, but Robin Hood refused.

"I thank you for your courtesy," he said, "but it behoves me to get back to our rendezvous in Sherwood Forest as quickly as may be. My merry men have been scattered of late, and from word that reached me this morning I fear there is mischief afoot. The Sheriff of Nottingham is going to measure his wits and his strength against mine once more, for he has sworn that my head shall be stuck on a pike over Nottingham Castle gate."

"He has fared but ill in his former encounters with you, Robin Hood," said Sir Eustace, laughing. "And I have it in my mind that—"

He paused abruptly, and directed his glance along a narrow path that wound through the wood.

"Who comes here?" he exclaimed. "Someone apparently in great haste."

"'Tis Much the Miller's son," exclaimed Friar Tuck. "Truly the message that he bears must be of great import, for never before have I seen him run so fast."

"Well, good Much," said Robin Hood, "what brings you in such haste? Hast news of importance to communicate?"

"Ay, that have I," replied the miller, panting. "Sir Henwick Beauclerc, the Sheriff of Nottingham—"

"The Sheriff of Nottingham!" echoed Robin Hood. "Has he been through the forest?"

"Ay, that has he. 'Twas just before noon that he appeared with a strong force. We were but few; still, we held our ground for three hours. At last they got the better of us, but not until Will Scarlet and Clement of York were sorely wounded and prisoners in their hands. And that is not the worst—"

"Well, well?"

"The cowards were not content with making war upon men, but needs must attack the women. Maid Marian and Winifreda—Allan-a-Dale's wife—have been carried off by the tyrant of Not-

tingham. I, too, was a prisoner, but they released me in order that I should bear you this scroll. 'Tis from the sheriff himself."

Robin Hood snatched the parchment from his hand, and read the few words inscribed thereon.

"To Robin Hood, the Robber, of Sherwood Forest.

"The women known as Maid Marian and Winifreda, having fallen into our hands, both are like to be charged with witchcraft and sorcery, the penalty for which is death. There is a way, however, in which they may escape their just doom, and it is that you, Robin Hood, and the outlaw known as Allan-a-Dale do present yourselves at Nottingham Castle at the hour of sunset three days from this time, there to deliver your bodies to such punishment as the sheriff may deem fit. If you do not so appear the two women will be first publicly whipped and afterwards put to death."

"HENWICK BEAUCLERC."

Having first read this precious missive over to himself, Robin Hood next proceeded to read it aloud to the others.

Sir Eustace Alleyne struck his mailed fist angrily upon his thigh.

"Now, by my halidom!" he cried, "but 'tis the most villainous plot that I ever heard of. The miscreant of Nottingham should have his spurs shred from his heels for unknightly conduct. The dastard! Good Robin Hood, ye may count on me an ye require aid to rescue Maid Marian and the fair Winifreda."

"Ay, and on me also!" exclaimed Leofric. "There is a score to be settled 'twixt the tyrant of Nottingham and me, which I fain would pay off as soon as possible."

"I thank you, gentle sirs, for your kindness," replied the outlaw, "and I think it possible that I shall avail myself of your generous offer of help."

"What is your intention, good Robin?" asked the friar.

"To be at Nottingham Castle at the hour appointed by the sheriff," replied Robin Hood.

CHAPTER 2.

Interrupted Plotters.

"BESHREW me! but they are hard hitters, these outlaws of Sherwood. But yestere'en three of them, aided by two knights and a dwarf, who hath the strength of a giant, put to flight a good score of my men, and left me half-stunned upon the ground with a crack on my pate from the quarter-staff of a rogue who was arrayed in the garb of a holy friar."

So spake Gaston Malvoisin, better known as the Red Fox, as he lifted a flagon of spiced wine to his lips and drank deeply of its contents.

It was the night after the combat in which he and his men had been so signally worsted by Sir Eustace Alleyne, Leofric, and the outlaws, and he was supping with his friend and fellow-plotter in many a vile scheme, Sir Henwick Beauclerc, the Sheriff of Nottingham.

It was not in the Castle of Nottingham that they met, however, but at a small house outside the town, which was a rendezvous to which they repaired when they desired to hold communication with each other.

For even Beauclerc, powerful though he was in that district, could not venture to let it be known that he was friendly with a man who was under sentence of banishment for disgraceful conduct, having been deprived of his knightly spurs for treason against the king.

Truly they were a well-matched pair of scoundrels.

"I know well the friar to whom you refer," exclaimed the sheriff, with an angry frown, called forth by particularly unpleasant recollections. "A murrain on the knave! but I will lay him by the heels yet! But who were these two knights that you speak of?"

"Sir Eustace Alleyne one, Leofric the Saxon the other," replied Gaston Malvoisin.

The dark frown on the sheriff's face deepened.

"That same Sir Eustace Alleyne put me to shame once before the prince and his train of nobles," he said; "and he is friendly with these outlaws, I know—

may the Evil One seize the whole brood! But this same friendship may yet cost him dear!"

"I trust so," replied the Red Fox carelessly. "If there is booty to be obtained at his downfall, call in me and my free companions to your aid. But we want to know that there is something to be gained besides hard knocks."

He helped himself to a wing of a capon, took another draught of wine, and glanced at his companion, whose brows were bent in moody thought.

"You told me awhile agone," pursued Malvoism, "that your plot for the capture of bold Robin Hood and others of his band could not fail this time. Let me hear what it is."

"'Tis simple," replied the sheriff; "and for that reason more likely of success. Having learned that his band was scattered, this very day I attacked their haunts in the forest with a strong force under me."

Here the Red Fox interrupted the narrative with a boisterous laugh.

"By St. Grizel!" he cried, "I commend thee, Beauclerc, for thy caution. A strong force under thee to attack a few women and old men, for if the band were scattered there would be few others in the camp. 'Twas well to assure thyself thus of an easy victory."

The sheriff flushed angrily under his companion's taunt, for he liked not his motives to be spoken of so openly, even when there were no others to hear.

"A truce to this unprofitable recrimination," he said. "There were enough of the outlaws left to make a stubborn defence, but in the end we captured two of the most mischievous of them."

"Countest thou the two women as such?" laughed the Red Fox.

"Not in this case. The two I referred to are the outlaws named Will Scarlet and Clement of York, pestilent knaves both!"

"But the women. Your plot hinges on them to some extent, does it not?"

"Yes. The women are Maid Marian and Winifreda, Allan-a-Dale's wife. I have them close prisoners, and have sent word to Robin Hood that they are to be charged with witchcraft, and on

one condition only will their lives be spared."

"And that is——"

"That Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale give themselves up to me at the castle to suffer in their place."

"And you think that those two outlaws will be so foolish as to put their heads in the lion's mouth?"

"I feel assured of it," replied the sheriff. "Robin Hood would give his life at any time to protect Maid Marian from harm, and Allan-a-Dale, being but newly wed, will do any rash act to save his wife. Once in my power, I will lose no time in setting the executioner to work, and their heads will be seen on pikes above the castle gates by sunrise the next morning, as a warning to all who have aided and abetted them."

There was a pause in the conversation, during which time the Red Fox addressed himself to the congenial task of finishing up the good cheer that had been placed before him.

The Sheriff of Nottingham ate but little.

"By my faith!" exclaimed the Red Fox at last, "but I enjoy these visits, good Henwick, for there are times when we fare but badly in our nest at Tirlstone Hills. And—— Why, what ails you, man?"

The abrupt question was called forth by the sudden and ghastly pallor that had overspread the features of Sir Henwick Beauclerc. His lips were ashen grey, and his hand trembled as he pointed to the wall of the room opposite to where he was seated.

"How came that there?" he gasped.

"How came what——"

The Red Fox, in his turn, paused amazed. But having somewhat more courage than his companion, or, at least, less cause for fear, he neither trembled nor turned pale.

"'Tis passing strange!" he muttered. "I swear by all the saints in the calendar that there was nothing there when we entered the room."

"There was nothing there a moment ago!" cried the startled sheriff. "I have been facing in that direction all the time. The window is closed——"

"And the door, too. It would seem

that there is sorcery being practised after all, for in no other way can the circumstance be accounted for."

The cause of the sheriff's fear and Malvoisin's astonishment was a cloth-yard shaft, such as the archers of Sherwood used, which was stuck in the wall at the height of a man's breast, pinning thereto a small square of parchment.

How it came there was an utter mystery.

Gaston Malvoisin rose from his seat and, plucking the arrow from the wall, carried the square of parchment to the table. There were a few words written upon it, and these were read aloud by Beauclerc:

"Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale will be at the gates of Nottingham Castle at the hour appointed."

That was all. It was Robin Hood's answer to the sheriff's letter.

CHAPTER 3.

In the Lion's Den.

THE sun was just dipping behind a low bank of clouds in the west when Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale, unarmed save for the short dagger each wore at his side, walked boldly across the drawbridge to the strong, iron-studded gates of the castle of Nottingham.

They had been recognised by some of the townsfolk as they passed through the streets, and great was the amazement of the good people that the sturdy outlaws should of their own free will put themselves into the power of their greatest enemy, the man who had sworn that their heads should not remain long on their shoulders if ever he got them into his clutches again.

There were a few of the more knowing ones, however, who guessed at the reason of their visit, for they had heard rumours of the capture of Maid Marian and Winifreda, and these shook their heads sadly, for they opined that the gallant outlaws were going to certain death.

One or two men-at-arms had followed and kept them in sight from the moment of their entrance into the town,

but, in obedience to the sheriff's orders, did not attempt to interfere with them before they reached the castle.

Halfway across the drawbridge they paused, and Robin Hood turned round. Three men-at-arms, thinking that he had altered his mind at the last moment, closed round the outer end of the drawbridge as though to bar the way of escape.

"Do you see the curs?" exclaimed Robin Hood contemptuously. "They would seem to think that I am as cowardly as themselves. And yet I will cause them to shrink before me without so much as taking a weapon in my hand. See!"

First glancing to right and left as though looking for someone whom he expected, he took a step forward and suddenly raised a bugle to his lips. But he sounded no note upon it.

The action was enough, and the men-at-arms, doubtless under the impression that he was about to summon his followers, hastened to ensconce themselves in sheltered positions in case a sudden flight of arrows should sweep through the air.

A loud burst of laughter from Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale showed them that they had been tricked, and they came forth looking savage and foolish, and vowing vengeance against the outlaws. But the latter, still laughing in derision, walked calmly up to the castle gates and hammered loudly upon the woodwork with their dagger-hilts.

There was a few moments' pause, and then the ponderous gates swung slowly open, and a warder, backed by a dozen armed men, appeared grouped under the great archway.

"Who are you, and what want you here?" demanded the warder, who, however, knew full well those whom he was addressing.

"I am Robin Hood, and my companion is Allan-a-Dale," replied the outlaw chief quietly.

"Ah! you have come here at the bidding of the good sheriff——"

"We have come at the request of the Sheriff of Nottingham," interrupted Robin Hood. "I come at no man's bidding."

"And we are here," added Allan-a-Dale, "to ransom the two fair ladies whom Sir Henwick Beauclerc holds as prisoners. A murrain on the coward for making war on women!"

"Speak ye fair of the good sheriff," snapped the warder; "an ye are insolent it will not better your case."

Robin Hood eyed him from head to foot.

"And what may your name be, good fellow?" he said.

"Fellow me no fellows!" replied the warder angrily. "Remember where you are, and be civil."

"Still, your name?"

"It can matter nothing to you," pursued the warder, "for you are not likely to have the opportunity of carrying it long in your mind. But to satisfy your curiosity I may tell you that I am called Dennis the Carter, though forsooth, I am a warder now, and no carter."

"Then, Dennis the Carter," replied Robin Hood, "let me tell you that I shall probably carry your name longer in my memory than you are likely to live to bear it. Lead us on now to the sheriff, for I can waste no more time in bandying words with menials."

There was an air of calm authority in Robin Hood's manner which compelled obedience, so the warder ordered one of the retainers to lead the two outlaws into the sheriff's presence. But he could not resist hurling a parting shaft at them.

"Ye speak boldly now," he said; "but ere another twelve hours have passed ye'll have no heads on your shoulders to talk with."

The great gates clanged to as he uttered the words, and the bar was dropped into its iron socket.

Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale followed their guide across the courtyard to the castle-keep, and hence up to the chamber where Sir Henwick Beauclerc was awaiting them. Standing behind him were four men-at-arms, with halberds and cross-bows.

The sheriff looked up as the outlaws were brought in, and a malignant smile of triumph crossed his evil face.

"Close the door," he said to the

retainer who had guided them, "and stand guard without."

The man saluted and withdrew, and Sir Henwick Beauclerc eyed his two prisoners with a menacing scowl, for as prisoners he now regarded them.

"So you have come," he said.

Robin Hood nodded easily.

"You hardly expected us in such peaceful guise," he replied. "But you received my answer to your communication?"

The sheriff changed colour.

"Your answer!" he stammered, remembering the mysterious arrow and square of parchment which had been transfixed against the wall of his room.

"Even so. It was delivered while you were supping with the Red Fox of Tirlstone."

"Enough of this folly!" exclaimed Beauclerc, glancing uneasily at his retainers, for he had no desire that it should be generally known that he was on intimate terms with the disgraced knight. "I know not of what you speak."

"You have easily forgotten," said Robin Hood, with a sarcastic smile. "You thought that the arrow and parchment had come into the room by supernatural means, but it was I who fired the arrow with the parchment attached to the point."

"You!"

"Ah! I see you remember now. I gained entrance to the house, no matter how, and found the door of the room in which you were supping partially open, not closed as you afterwards imagined. Watching my opportunity when the heads of you and your guest were turned away, I fired the shaft lightly. Then I closed the door and quitted the house again. The explanation is simple, you see. But remember, Sir Henwick, that I held your life in my hands at that moment, and that I spared you. For it would have been as easy for me to send the arrow through your heart as into the wall of the room."

The sheriff went pale to the lips at the very thought that while he had been feasting his life had been at the mercy of the outlaw whom he had wronged. But not for one instant did he intend

that Robin Hood's magnanimity in thus sparing his life should make any difference in his intentions regarding him.

He had determined that Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale should die before sunrise on the morrow, and he only had them before him now in order to gloat over them, as a tiger would gloat over the prey which it knew could not escape.

But Robin Hood had plans of his own as well as the Sheriff of Nottingham, and he would not have walked calmly into Nottingham Castle unless he had beforehand arranged some method of getting out again. He knew Beauclerc's character well, and was fully aware that even though Allan-a-Dale and himself gave up their lives as ransom for Maid Marian and Winifreda the two fair captives would not be released.

The sheriff turned to his retainers.

"Ye all heard his confession," he went on. "With his own lips did he not this moment say that he stood at the door of the room in which I was supping, and had the mind to send an arrow into my body?"

"We heard him say so," replied the retainers.

"Enough. For that alone his life may well be held forfeit."

"Base and dishonoured knight!" exclaimed Robin Hood. "Well might I have known that you would twist my words so as to put a different meaning on them from what I intended; but that matters little, for I tell you now to your teeth that you are not fit to live, and the day may come when I will have you hanged to the bough of a stout tree in Sherwood Forest."

"And now that we are here, let us to the business in hand," put in Allan-a-Dale. "Keep your written promise, and restore your two fair captives to liberty. There are worthy folk in the town who will give them shelter until they can get back to their sylvan home 'neath the greenwood tree."

"The fair captives will remain in good hands, have no fear," replied Beauclerc, with a harsh laugh. "You must be fools, indeed, an you suppose that I shall release them now that I have you safe in my hands. Your lives

are forfeit a score of times over, and there can be no question of terms between outlaws and the Sheriff of Nottingham."

"We did not put faith in your word, base hound!" said Robin Hood. "For we knew full well before we came here that you would be forsworn."

The sheriff looked at him uneasily. If these bold outlaws had that opinion, why had they voluntarily surrendered themselves to him? Had they some design upon his life, even here, in his own castle, where he was surrounded by armed retainers?

"Away with them!" he said shortly. "Their tongues are too long, and if they wag too freely will be plucked out ere their heads are laid on the block 'neath the executioner's axe."

Neither Robin Hood nor Allan-a-Dale made any resistance as their guards closed round them and led them out of the chamber and along a broad corridor towards a room in the Byward Tower where prisoners were sometimes kept.

Indeed, resistance would have been worse than useless, for a hundred men-at-arms would have mustered at the first signal of alarm, and to run the risk of being wounded, or perhaps killed in a fight, would not just then have suited Robin Hood's plans.

"Here are bread and water," said one of the men-at-arms, placing a pitcher and a loaf on the floor. "Divide it between you, for there is as much there, I trow, as you will need. An you know any prayers 'twill be as well to repeat them, for the Jack priest who has care of the souls of those who have their abode in the castle is at this moment lying tipsy in his cell."

"We will do without the services of your drunken Jack priest, good fellow," replied Robin Hood. "Good-night. Disturb us not, I beg of you, for we would fain be alone during the few hours of life that remain to us."

"You shall not be disturbed by me," said the man as he closed and bolted the door behind him.

As soon as they were left alone Robin Hood climbed up on to Allan-a-Dale's shoulders and looked out of the narrow,

barred window—little better than a loophole—about nine feet from the floor of the cell, which commanded a good view of a portion of the town.

Darkness had fallen, and the curfew bell was tolling to warn the people that it was time to put out all lights and fires—a custom which Sir Henwick Beauclerc did not consider it necessary strictly to adhere to within the precincts of the castle.

"There is a beacon fire burning on Tunstall Hill," said Robin Hood. "Tis the signal. Little John is alert and ready."

"We need have no fear but what he will perform the task laid before him right well," replied Allan-a-Dale. "Beshrew me, but we should need a father confessor in good sooth an he failed us."

"He will not fail us," said Robin Hood as he slipped from his companion's shoulders on to the floor again.

Two hours passed, and the streets of the town were for the most part silent and deserted, for but few of the peaceful inhabitants ventured forth after nightfall.

The castle, too, was in darkness, save where lanterns were hung by the guard-house, and the light in the sheriff's own quarters. There was also another room that was partially illuminated by the wavering flame of a wood fire, but this uncertain light was not visible from the outside.

Within this chamber, which went by the name of the Stone Kitchen, half a dozen men, principally scullions and others connected with the staff of domestics attached to the household of the castle, were seated on benches round the fire talking over the events of the evening.

"'Tis said," observed one as he kicked the logs into a blaze, sending a shower of sparks up the wide chimney, "that the sheriff will behead the four prisoners to-morrow morning at first sign of daybreak."

"They have Robin Hood and three of his band safe," observed the oldest man of the company; "but his head is still on his shoulders, and that being so there is no saying what may happen

next. There have been unwelcome surprises at previous times for those who have thought that they had the bold Robin in their power. It may well be that we have not heard the last of him yet."

As though in partial confirmation of his words there arose at that moment a loud shouting in one of the upper passages of the castle, mingled with the sound of rushing feet and the clash of arms. This clamour was presently added to by the barking of dogs and the howls of a man who came bumping down the stone stairs in a manner that suggested he had been thrown down.

"By the bones of St. Anthony!" cried an under cook, "there is something going forward that does not sound much like a merry-making. You said we had not heard the last of Robin Hood yet," he added, turning to him who had made that remark, "and it would not surprise me an your words are true. Bethink you! what can be the meaning of this uproar?"

"We shall know anon," replied the other calmly. "For my part I shall remain here until someone brings the news of what is happening. I have not the wish to take any part in it."

This wise resolve was shared by the others, and with the quiet satisfaction of men who in the midst of alarms feel that their own safety is assured they listened to the confusion of sounds that broke the stillness of the night above them.

The noise had become fainter, and the general opinion was that the combat, or chase of an escaping prisoner, or whatever was going forward, was now transferred to the battlements, where it might well be expected to end.

But it did not end there.

The door of the kitchen was flung suddenly open, and the captain of the guard rushed in. An instant later he stood transfixed with astonishment, gazing at the great fireplace.

For suddenly a shower of soot fell on to the burning logs, followed by a series of the most extraordinary sounds which appeared to proceed from about halfway up the chimney.

The domestics retreated hastily from

the fireplace, and no sooner had they done so than a huge body shot suddenly into view, and narrowly escaping plumping straight into the fire, rolled out on to the front of the hearth.

After a moment's pause, during which various uncouth sounds proceeded from it, the rotund figure rose up on its feet.

It was a most amazing apparition, and the domestics gave a shout of alarm on seeing it.

"The saints preserve us!" cried one. "But 'tis the foul fiend himself among us in the guise of a holy friar."

"That can hardly be," said the captain of the guard, who was a little less frightened than his companions. "For see! he appears not to be at home amid the flames, and surely Sathanas would take no heed to so small a fire."

In good sooth there was some cause for their alarm and amazement, for it was a most affrighting figure that had suddenly appeared among them.

Robed in the gown of a holy friar it certainly was, though the garment was in somewhat of a filthy condition by reason of the descent down the chimney, but the face and hair, and shaven crown, were as black as charcoal. And out of this blackness a pair of fierce eyes gleamed angrily.

Few, even of those who were most intimate with him, would have recognised in the sooty, begrimed features the usually jovial countenance of Friar Tuck. For it was that worthy priest who had thus unceremoniously bounced suddenly into the midst of the company assembled in the Stone Kitchen.

The captain of the guard cast one keen glance at him, and then hurried from the room.

"By Saint Dunstan!" gasped the friar, "'twas a narrow escape, and 'tis a mercy that the chimney was a spacious one, else had I stuck in the middle and been smoked dry like a side of bacon hung up for the curing."

"'Tis assuredly not Sathanas!" exclaimed one of the scullions. "Else would he not swear by a saint!"

"Sathanas, thou fool!" cried the priest angrily. "I am a holy friar, and missing my footing on thy battlements,

whether I had gone for pious meditation, I came tumbling down this chimney, as thou hast seen. And beshrew me 'twas mighty foul; I have done thee good service by removing most of the soot."

"Well, worthy friar," observed the under cook, "we would fain know how you got upon the battlements of this castle, since you can scarcely have flown there. Even a holy friar does not possess wings. I shrewdly suspect that it was you whom the men-at-arms were chasing just now."

What answer the priest would have given to this query is uncertain, for at that moment the attention of everybody was attracted to the shouting of the men-at-arms, who were descending the stairs, and calling to each other to search the Stone Kitchen, as it was into that chamber that the man they were after had fallen.

Friar Tuck had in truth managed to slip in through the castle gates after dark, with a party of travellers who had sought shelter there for the night, but having been recognised by one of the warders he had been chased from one place to another, until he had been driven on to the battlements, where in trying to seek a hiding-place he had fallen down the great chimney of the Stone Kitchen with the result that has been recorded.

His pursuers had now reached the door of this apartment, and the friar, determined not to be taken without a struggle, had snatched up a wooden bench which he intended to use as a weapon of defence.

All at once the clamour ceased, as the men-at-arms paused for a moment before making a dash into the room.

Then suddenly the momentary silence was broken by the clear, ringing blast of a bugle-horn which echoed and re-echoed in all the corridors of the castle.

"Robin Hood's signal!" cried the friar exultantly. "Stand aside, knaves! I will e'en spare thy crowns an thou makest no attempt to stop me. Ho, ho! The tyrant of Nottingham shall see in what manner Robin Hood has come to the castle to pay ransom for the two fair captives!"

The domestics needed no second bidding to get out of the burly friar's path, for he flourished the heavy oaken bench with as much ease as though it had been a quarter-staff.

Flinging open the door he rushed out into the passage, while at the same moment, with a resounding crash, the castle gate was battered in. Then a loud cheer arose, mingled with the battle-cry of the outlaws:

"Robin Hood! To the rescue! Liberty or death!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Captives Rescued.

As already said, Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale had not given themselves up into the power of the treacherous Sheriff of Nottingham without first having arranged a plan whereby there was good hope of their being able to get the better of their foes, rescue the captives, and regain their own liberty into the bargain.

Such a plan had been arranged by the bold chief of the outlaws, every detail having been thought out to the minutest point beforehand, Little John and the other lieutenants of the band being well instructed in the parts they were to play.

The party of strangers that had been admitted, although professedly travellers on their way from London to York, were in reality members of Robin Hood's band and some retainers of Leofric the Saxon, the latter, with Sir Eustace Alleyne, having joined forces with the outlaw captain and his men in their forthcoming attempt to effect the rescue of the prisoners held by the treacherous and cowardly Beauclerc.

Friar Tuck had slipped into the castle with the supposed travellers, although in so doing he was acting contrary to the instructions of his leader, who had desired him to remain with the attacking party outside.

But the bold priest had an insatiable curiosity, and this had led him to run the risk of entering the castle in order that he might see what was going on and be in the thick of the best of the fighting.

How the burly friar fared in his quest for excitement has already been shown, for unfortunately for him he was recognised by one of the retainers before he had been ten minutes in the castle.

From time to time, either Robin Hood or Allan-a-Dale had been watching through the loophole of their cell for the second signal from Little John, which would inform them that the men disguised as travellers had been admitted, and that all was ready for the attack.

At length, about two hours before midnight, Allan-a-Dale saw a lamp flashed five times at the foot of the castle hill.

It was the signal. A few moments later the sentinel in the passage was overpowered, and the cell door unbolted. Will Scarlet and Clement of York were also located in one of the castle dungeons and quickly released. Then Robin Hood stepped forth and sounded his bugle-horn so loud and clear that it was heard far beyond the castle precincts in the very heart of the town.

On hearing it, and the sounds that followed—the crashing in of the outer gate, the ring of steel, the shouts of besiegers and besieged—Beauclerc, assailed with a sudden and terrible fear, rushed madly out from his chamber, calling loudly for the guard to inform him what was taking place.

But the guard at that moment had no time to answer any questions, as they were fighting for their lives in the courtyard, while the foresters under Little John, and the retainers of Leofric and Sir Eustace Alleyne under their respective leaders, poured through the battered-down portal to the attack of the castle keep.

Meanwhile, Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale had been supplied with swords, and putting themselves at the head of those who were already within the keep, they hurled themselves upon a body of men-at-arms who were pressing towards them.

“Have at the Dastards!” cried Robin.

In quick succession he struck to right and left, levelling a warrior at each blow, and his followers, although in-

ferior in numbers to the men-at-arms who opposed them, fought with such fury that they drove them slowly before them along the vaulted passage.

In the midst of the melee Allan-a-Dale suddenly burst into a great roar of laughter.

“By the bones of Saint Anthony!” he cried, “who or what have we here?”

Robin Hood turned and glanced down the side passage at which his lieutenant was pointing, and what he saw within also caused him to burst into a great shout of laughter.

“‘Tis either a demon from the nether pit, or else, Friar Tuck himself!” he said.

“‘Tis the friar sure enough,” exclaimed Allan-a-Dale. “Saw you ever such a face?”

“Laugh on! laugh on!” cried the friar wrathfully as he joined in the fray, whirling the heavy bench around his head as easily as a shepherd-boy flourishes his little crook. “But had you come from battlement to kitchen in as great a hurry, and by the same path as I used, methinks you would not be so ready to grin.”

“That may be,” replied his captain; “but I fancy we should have chosen a cleaner way. Nevertheless, you are welcome, good Tuck, for your appearance alone should fright our enemies, to say nothing of the strange weapon which you wield in your brawny fists.”

Bang, bang, bang! went the heavy bench on iron caps and steel helmets, the wearers thereof going down in all directions beneath the holy clerk’s ponderous blows.

The great desire of Robin Hood and Allan-a-Dale was to get to the room where Maid Marian and Winifreda were imprisoned as speedily as possible, in case of some act of treachery on the part of Beauclerc, when he knew that their rescue was being attempted.

The leader of the men-at-arms had fallen wounded at Robin Hood’s feet, and the gallant outlaw chief promised to spare his life if he would lead him to the chamber where the captives were confined.

“Lead thee, I cannot, bold Robin Hood,” said the fellow, “for I am sorely

wounded and faint with loss of blood; but I will gladly direct you. Ascend yonder winding stair, and turn down a side passage to the left. At the end of that passage is their apartment."

"Come, good comrade," exclaimed Robin Hood to Allan-a-Dale. "Let us up quickly, for while we are here grave danger may menace our loved ones."

They rushed up the winding stair, but ere they had reached the top shriek after shriek rang out above them, coming apparently from the very chamber to which they were making their way.

"Help, help!" came the cry, in a woman's terrified voice. "Robin, dear Robin!"

"Allan—husband—oh! an thou hearst me, come to my aid!"

"'Tis Marian and Winifreda!" cried Robin Hood. "By my father's blood! the life of every man in this castle shall answer if a hair of their heads be harmed!"

A few moments, and they had reached the chamber door, which was open. The sight which met their eyes within the room roused them to the utmost pitch of fury.

The two women were struggling in the grasp of two ruffians, while two others with cords in their hands were waiting to secure the wrists and ankles of the fair captives.

"Cease thy yelling, wench!" cried one of the fellows savagely, "or I shall be compelled to put a gag in thy mouth."

"Villains!" shouted Robin Hood, dashing into the apartment at that instant. "Your lives shall answer for this outrage!"

The outlaw captain's keen blade flashed in the torchlight, and so fierce was the blow that it shone asunder, as though it had been a willow twig, the tough handle of the mace which the man-at-arms raised to protect his head. Next instant the wretch dropped dead, just as one of his companions, with a choking gasp, also fell a victim to a blow from Allan-a-Dale.

The other two miscreants instantly released the women and fled from the room.

"Come, sweet Marian," said Robin Hood, "it ill befits that your bright eyes should gaze upon such sights as these. Yet blood had to be shed or we could never have rescued you."

Allan-a-Dale had taken his wife in his arms and imprinted a kiss on her lips.

"I can hear the war-cry of the gallant Sir Eustace Alleyne and the worthy thane Leofric," said Robin Hood. "They have won all the outer works and are now battering at the postern gate of the keep. Come, we must fight our way down and meet them at the entrance."

During the time that these scenes were being enacted by the few devoted followers of Robin Hood within the keep, Sir Eustace Alleyne, Leofric the Saxon, and Little John, having battered down the main gates and captured the barbican, were fighting their way across the courtyard to the square tower which was the strongest part of all Norman castles, lying well within the encircling walls and outworks. This square tower was called the keep.

"Good Little John!" cried Sir Eustace to the giant forester, "do you keep up a heavy discharge of arrows by your men on the battlements, and mind you quell with your shafts whoever shall appear to man the rampart. Noble Leofric, wilt thou take the direction of those of our followers who are about to make the second assault?"

"Not so, by the soul of Hereward!" said the Saxon thane. "You have more knowledge in the art of war than I, and it is fit that you should lead. I will follow wherever you shall point the way. In case we should meet the villainous Beauclerc face to face during the assault, the only favour I ask is that you will leave me to deal with him."

"I should have been better pleased to have granted any other favour of your asking, gallant Leofric," replied Sir Eustace; "but since you have resigned the leadership to me I cannot well refuse you."

"Thanks, Sir Eustace," rejoined Leofric. "My only fear is that the recreant knight will take care not to expose his precious body too freely to danger."

"To the postern! Forward, men, forward!" cried Sir Eustace, waving his battle-axe. "Merry Saint George for England! To the charge, bold comrades!"

The gallant knight, closely followed by Leofric, dashed across the courtyard, and coming to the walls of the keep began to thunder with his axe upon the gate.

The leaders were protected in part by an abutment of masonry over the upper part of the portal from the shot and stones cast by the defenders from the battlements. But their followers had no such shelter; two were instantly shot with crossbow bolts, and two more killed with heavy stones which were hurled down upon them. The others retreated back into the barbican which the archers under Little John were holding, and whence they kept up an incessant discharge of arrows upon the defenders of the keep.

The situation of Leofric and Sir Eustace was now truly dangerous, and would have been still more so but for the constancy of the archers upon the barbican, who ceased not to shower their arrows upon the battlements, distracting the attention of those by whom they were manned, and thus affording a respite to the two knights from the storm of missiles which must otherwise have overwhelmed them.

It was not Sir Henwick Beauclerc, however, who was urging on the defenders of the castle to do their utmost, but a knight named Gilbert St. Omer, the guest of the sheriff, and possessing considerably more valour than his host.

"Shame on ye all!" cried this knight to the soldiers around him. "Do ye call yourselves crossbow men, and let these two dogs keep their station under the walls of the castle? Heave over the coping stones from the battlement. Get pickaxe and levers and down with the largest of them."

But as one of the men-at-arms under Sir Gilbert St. Omer's direction was loosening a heavy piece of stone-carved work, a shaft sent by Little John himself pierced him right through the breast, and he fell back with a groan.

A second soldier caught from the hands of the dying man the iron lever, with which he heaved at and had loosened the stone pinnacle, when, receiving an arrow through his head-piece, he pitched from the battlements into the courtyard, a dead man.

The men-at-arms were daunted, for no armour seemed proof against the shots of these terrible archers.

"Do you give ground, base knaves?" cried Gilbert St. Omer. "Give me the lever."

And, snatching it up, he again assailed the loosened pinnacle, which was of weight enough to demolish the masonry projection over the door and crush the two knights underneath also.

Little John saw the danger which menaced Sir Eustace and Leofric, and thrice he sent a shaft against St. Omer, and thrice did his arrow bound back from the knight's armour of proof.

"'Tis a coat of Spanish steel," muttered the archer. "Had it been forged by an English smith, those arrows had gone through as if it had been silk. Our smiths have not yet learned the art of making such armour."

He then called out at the top of his voice:

"Sir Eustace! noble Leofric! bear back and let the coping fall!"

His warning voice was unheard, for the din which the knights themselves occasioned by their strokes upon the postern would have drowned a score of voices.

Bertram the dwarf, Leofric's henchman, sprang forward to warn his master of his impending fate, or to share it with him.

But his warning would have come too late; the massive pinnacle already tottered, and St. Omer, who still heaved at his task, would have accomplished it, had not the voice of Sir Henwick Beauclerc sounded close in his ear.

"All is lost, St. Omer!" he cried. "We must make good our escape."

"Thou art mad to say so," replied the other.

"I am mad only with rage!" hissed Beauclerc. "These fiends are swarming within the castle as well as without, though how they got there the saints

alone know. Robin Hood is free, and leading them, so there is little enough hope of our repelling the assault now."

"To escape we must fight our way through them," said the knight. "Collect all your men together——"

"That would be utter folly!" interrupted the sheriff hastily. "I know of a way out by a secret stair. We must essay it alone, you and I."

"Lead on, then," answered St. Omer, "since there is nothing else for it; but I like not the plan."

A few moments later the two worthies were making their way along a secret passage, and thus they succeeded in getting away from the avenging foresters.

Just as the first grey streak of dawn was appearing in the eastern sky Robin Hood mustered his men in the courtyard of the castle. There were many gaps in their ranks, but that was no more than was to be expected after the waging of so fierce a combat. It was some satisfaction to know that their enemies had suffered much more heavily than themselves.

"Shout, yeomen!" cried Robin Hood. "Our task is well accomplished. Let each bring his spoil to our chosen place of rendezvous at the trysting-tree in the Harthill Walk. For there at mid-day will we make just partition among our own bands, together with our worthy allies in our great deed of vengeance."

CHAPTER 5.

Prince John at Nottingham Castle.

Two weeks had passed by since the stirring events recorded in the last chapter had taken place, and the Sheriff of Nottingham once again was in a position to exercise the authority which he had been temporarily forced to abandon on the seizure of the castle by the bold outlaws and their allies, Sir Eustace Alleyne and Leofric the Saxon.

A far different scene was being enacted in the castle now, for Prince John had journeyed down from London with several of the Norman nobles who usually moved with the court, and a small army of retainers.

He was the guest of Sir Henwick Beauclerc, and the wily sheriff, anxious

to curry favour, and also to blot out the remembrance of his recent ignominious defeat, the story of which had reached London, was entertaining the prince and the nobles on a scale of magnificence seldom attempted.

Guests were invited in great numbers, although they were exclusively confined to the Norman nobility and gentry of the neighbourhood, for Beauclerc hated the Saxons too bitterly ever to have one at his table, if he could possibly avoid it.

The evening of the great banquet had arrived, and the guests were seated at a table, which groaned under a quantity of good cheer.

Besides dishes of domestic origin, there were various delicacies brought from foreign parts and a quantity of rich pastry, as well as of the simnel bread and wastel cakes, which were only used at the tables of the highest nobility.

The banquet was crowned with the richest wines, both foreign and home-made. For Prince John, it was well known, and those who courted his favour by imitating his vices, were apt to indulge to excess in the pleasures of the trencher and the goblet.

The long feast, which needs no special description here, at length came to an end, and while the goblet circulated freely men talked of the tournament which was shortly to be held outside the town of Nottingham in honour of the prince's visit.

"You will have an opportunity at the tourney, Beauclerc, and you also, St. Omer," exclaimed the prince as he quaffed a cup of wine to the health of his host, "of avenging the insult recently put upon you by Sir Eustace Alleyne and Leofric the Saxon, knights who have degraded themselves by association with a gang of outlaws. And, by the thunder of heaven, I will have Sherwood Forest freed of those same pestilient outlaws, though it take a thousand men-at-arms to do it!"

There was no reply to the latter part of this speech, for the courtiers remembered that the prince had once before attempted to sweep the forest clear of Robin Hood and his gallant archers, with disastrous results. Prince John

had led the attacking force in person, and in the end was captured by the foresters, after his force had been thoroughly defeated. And he seemed to forget that on that occasion he owed his life to the King of Sherwood, who had not only treated him with the utmost courtesy, but had him escorted out of the forest to a place of safety on the morning following his capture.

"Methinks," continued Prince John, after a pause, "that we might find an excuse, by reason of this recent act of his, to deprive this churl, Leofric, of the Manor and Castle of Northmoor, the lands appertaining to which I have heard are passing rich. How say you, Sir Brian Waldemar?" he added, turning to one of his followers, who was a sort of chief counsellor; "would you be willing to hold this barony of Northmoor as a gift from the Crown?"

"By Saint Anthony!" answered the knight addressed, "you will find me willing enough, your highness; and I will consent that ye hold me a Saxon if Leofric, or any of his brood, shall wrench from me the gift an it once passes into my hands."

"'Tis said," observed Beauclerc, "that Leofric has a beautiful niece, who is also an heiress; she would have to be taken over with the barony, for surely she could not be thrust out homeless upon the world?"

"Well, then, Sir Brian," said Prince John, "you would need to wed this fair Saxon if you took possession of the castle. What say you to that?"

"If the lands are to my liking, my lord," answered Sir Brian Waldemar, "it will be hard to displease me with a bride, and deeply will I hold myself bound to your highness for a good deed which will fulfil all promises made in favour of your servant and vassal."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the prince. "'Tis well spoken, Waldemar. And, now— Ha! what is it, Sir Henwick Beauclerc?"

The sheriff had slipped from his seat and made his way quietly to the prince's chair.

"A messenger has just brought this billet," said Beauclerc, putting a note into Prince John's hand.

"Whence comes he?" asked the prince.

"From foreign parts, your highness, but from whence I know not," replied the sheriff. "A Frenchman he is, and he says that he has ridden night and day to put it into your hands."

The prince looked narrowly at the superscription, and then at the seal, placed so as to secure the silk with which the billet was surrounded, and which bore the impression of three fleurs-de-lis.

John then opened the billet with apparent agitation, which visibly and greatly increased when he had perused the contents, which were expressed in these words:

"Take heed to yourself, for the lion is unchained."

The prince turned as pale as death, looked first on the ground, and then round at the assembled guests, like a man who has received news that a sentence of execution has been passed upon him.

Recovering from the first effects of his surprise, he rose from the table, then took Sir Brian Waldemar and Sir Henwick Beauclerc aside and put the billet into their hands successively.

"It means," he said, in a faltering voice, "that my brother Richard has obtained his freedom."

"This may be a false alarm, or a forged letter," said Beauclerc.

"It is France's own hand and seal," replied Prince John.

"It is time, then," said Waldemar, "to draw our party to a head, either at York or at some other central place. A few days later, and it will be indeed too late. Your highness will do well to have the tournament put off to a later date."

"There is no need," interrupted the sheriff.

"How so? Would you ignore the danger?"

"By no means. But, as your highness will listen to me, I will suggest a better plan than openly making our purpose known by any such act as collecting our party from all quarters hur-

riedly to some special place as Waldemar suggests."

"In Heaven's name, then, let us hear it," cried the prince. "The banquet is over, and I see that some of the guests, already scenting bad news, are now rising to depart. Their fears anticipate the event, and even now they begin to shrink from me."

"Fear not, my lord," said the sheriff; "we will show them such reasons as shall induce them to remain true to you whatever befall. Let us adjourn to my private apartment."

Informing those guests who remained that the prince had received certain news which required his immediate attention, but bidding them not to disturb themselves on that account, Beauclerc, with Sir Brian Waldemar and Prince John, quitted the banqueting hall and proceeded to a chamber where their privacy was assured.

"Now, Beauclerc," said the prince, "your plan."

The sheriff, having closed the door, drew Prince John and Sir Brian Waldemar to the further side of the apartment, as though he feared almost to reveal the scheme which he had in his mind in case some passing retainer in the outer passage might, perchance, overhear one word of it.

"It will be admitted," he said, in a whisper, "that it is our right—the right of the nobles—to choose from the blood-royal the prince who is best qualified to rule over the land; to choose him whose election will best promote the interests of the nobility. We have chosen Prince John in our minds, although so far we have taken no active steps to raise him to the supreme power. Remember, that when Richard returns—and the day, I take it, is not far distant now—he returns to enrich his needy and impoverished Crusaders at the expense of those who did not follow him to the Holy Land. He returns to call to a fearful reckoning those who, during his absence, have done aught that can be construed offence or encroachment upon either the laws of the land or the privileges of the Crown. Not only our possessions, but also our lives, will be endangered."

He paused, and the prince tapped his foot impatiently on the ground.

"We know all this," he said. "What need to dwell upon it? Let us hear this plan to which you referred."

"You will agree with me," pursued the sheriff, "that those whose lives are menaced have a right to protect themselves, even by going to the length of procuring the death of the enemy who menaces them."

"What mean you?" demanded Prince John, turning pale. "Those are bold words, if I read them aright. But make your meaning clearer."

"I must ask your highness to first forgive me for the daring nature of the suggestion I am about to make, remembering that I am risking all in your service."

"You have my forgiveness," replied the prince. "This interview is, of course, confidential. Proceed."

"There is reason to believe that King Richard will not land openly on these shores," said Beauclerc. "No one except, perhaps, a few of his most trusted followers, will have any actual knowledge of his return. Let a close watch, therefore, be kept on every port on the east and south coast, so that news may be brought to your highness the moment he lands. If his entrance into the country is not publicly announced, who shall be the wiser if he never appears in public again? If his appearance anywhere in this world should be rendered impossible—"

"You mean that you would take his life?" cried Waldemar, aghast.

"That is my meaning," admitted Beauclerc coldly. "He might be seized and thrown into the dungeons of a castle, but there is always danger in that. Has he not just escaped from the dungeon of one of the strongest castles in Austria? I repeat plainly there is no safety for us while he is alive."

"It will be vain to attempt such a deed," said Prince John, pacing the apartment with disordered steps, and expressing himself with an agitation to which the wine he had drunk partly contributed. "Who would attempt it, forsooth? It would fail, and the venge-

ance which you dread now at his hands would be as nothing to what would fall on your heads—and mine—in such a case."

"There is no need, your highness," pursued the sheriff, with a meaning smile, "that we should be implicated in the affair. I know of one who will do the work for us, on payment of a certain sum; and I can produce him within the hour, for he is staying at a lodging I have provided in the town—in case he might be wanted."

"Who is this man?"

"His name is Gaston Malvoisin, better known now in these parts as the Red Fox of Tirlstone."

"A disgraced knight under sentence of banishment," cried Sir Brian Waldemar, "who is now no better than the leader of a band of robbers."

"Do you imagine, then, that we could persuade a man of high position and probity to do the deed?" sneered the sheriff.

"'Tis not that," said Waldemar, "but the moment we take this man into our confidence we place ourselves in his power."

"On that point I differ from you," returned Beauclerc. "I think he is, on the contrary, in our power, or will be if he accepts the commission. No written agreement will pass between us, and I know the Red Fox well enough to be aware that if he undertakes the task he will do his utmost to carry it through successfully. Whether he succeeds or fails, do you suppose that anybody would believe his word against ours if he turned traitor to us? The word of a disgraced and dishonoured man who had attempted the life of his king would have no weight. It was King Richard who passed sentence of banishment upon him, therefore the motive of his crime would be put down to private revenge."

"There is much in what you say," admitted Prince John. "You tell us that this man can be produced within the hour?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Send for him, then," said the prince. "We will see him this very night. It is dangerous to delay."

The sheriff made an obeisance, and departed on his mission.

Prince John and Sir Brian Waldemar exchanged glances.

"Are you wise, my liege, in trusting Beauclerc so far?" asked Waldemar.

"I do not trust him," replied John. "He is thinking of himself all this time, for he has more reason to dread Richard's vengeance than any of us. Still, he may serve us; and forget not that now we have him in our power absolutely."

In less than an hour Beauclerc returned, accompanied by Gaston Malvoisin. The Red Fox bowed low to the prince, and then stood erect before him perfectly unembarrassed in his presence.

"I have already informed Gaston Malvoisin of the service we wish him to perform in return for a certain sum of money, part to be paid down to-morrow night, and the remainder after the—the work has been accomplished," said Beauclerc, "and he has agreed to undertake the task."

"Providing the sum offered is to my liking, your highness," interposed the Red Fox bluntly. "For, by Lucifer and all his imps, it is a task which is surrounded by many dangers."

"And yet one which chance may render easy of accomplishment," said the prince. "Not for one moment would I have considered the scheme had I not the welfare of England at heart. It was necessary that Cæsar should die for the good of Rome; it may also be necessary—"

He hesitated, and the Red Fox, who was always given to plain speaking, finished the sentence for him.

"That Richard should die for the good of England."

The prince started at the words, although they were the very ones he had in his own mind, but dared not utter.

"I am willing to overlook your past misdemeanours, and possibly grant you a pardon, if you become a benefactor to your country and the suffering people by acting the part of a Brutus and putting an end to the life of one who will be a tyrant when he returns to power."

The Red Fox shrugged his shoulders at John's speech.

"Not a jot care I," he said carelessly, "whether I shall be regarded as a benefactor to my country or not. My country has never done anything for me, and the suffering people, as you term them, can look after themselves. The prospect of a free pardon is, I admit, something worthy of consideration, but the prospect of handling a coolly sun is even more so. The life I lead as a captain of free companions is not unpleasant when there is plenty of money to jingle in one's purse."

The prince frowned at the free and careless tone of Malvoisin's speech, and Beauclerc bit his lip with annoyance. The plan was like to miscarry if the Red Fox was not more circumspect.

"A truce to your levity," said John sternly. "Remember in whose presence you stand, and your own position, which scarcely warrants your assuming such a bearing."

"I remember that well enough, your highness," retorted the Red Fox, "and I also remember the errand on which you have sent for me."

There was evidently no getting the better of this daring captain of free riders, who was perfectly unconcerned and at his ease. Sir Brian Waldemar flushed angrily at his somewhat insolent bearing, and said with asperity:

"You would do well to remember, sir, that you are within the walls of the Castle of Nottingham, and if the prince so ordered he could have you hanged from the battlements at once, as one who, not having accepted his sentence of banishment, is liable to death."

"I thought of all that before I came here," was the reply of the Red Fox to this unguarded speech, "and I have taken all necessary precautions. Sir Henwick Beauclerc has pledged his word for my safety, but if any treachery is attempted, by the bones of St. Dunstan, it will fare ill with those who play me false. I have taken good care of that."

As the Red Fox could not be persuaded to state what these precautions were, or how they would affect those present, there was a somewhat uneasy

feeling in the breasts of Prince John and the two nobles.

However, there was nothing for it but to go through with the conspiracy now, and, at all events, abstain from threatening the man who was to be their principal agent in carrying out their vile plot.

He would be of use to them now, and afterwards they would know how to deal with him if he was likely to prove dangerous.

And so this unscrupulous quartet of plotters, of whom, perhaps, the Red Fox was by no means the worst, hatched a scheme in that room of the castle, that, in good sooth, placed the life of Richard Cœur-de-Lion in deadly peril when his foot should once more tread the shores of the land he ruled.

CHAPTER 6.

The Knight of the Riven Chain.

The day of the tournament had arrived, and crowds of gaily-attired holiday-makers of all classes of society, from the highest to the lowest, were wending their way to the lists outside the town of Nottingham.

The scene was singularly romantic. On the verge of the forest was an extensive meadow of the finest and smoothest turf, bordered on one side by straggling oaks and elms, some of which had grown to an immense size.

The centre of the meadow was enclosed for the lists by strong palisades, forming a space of a quarter of a mile in length, and about half as broad.

The openings for the entry of the combatants were at the northern and southern extremities of the lists, accessible by strong wooden gates, each wide enough to admit two horsemen riding abreast.

At each of these portals were stationed two heralds, attended by trumpeters, pursuivants, and a strong body of men-at-arms for maintaining order and ascertaining the quality of the knights who proposed to engage in this martial game.

The exterior of the lists was in part occupied by temporary galleries, spread with tapestry and carpets, and accom-

modated with cushions for the convenience of those ladies and nobles who were expected to attend the tournament.

One gallery, in the very centre of one side of the lists, was raised higher than the others, more richly decorated, and graced by a sort of throne and canopy, on which the royal arms were emblazoned.

Squires, pages, and yeomen in rich liveries, waited around this place of honour, which was designed for Prince John and his attendants.

A narrow space betwixt the galleries and the lists gave accommodation for yeomanry and spectators of the middle-class, while the common multitude arranged themselves upon large banks of turf prepared for the purpose, which enabled them to obtain a fair view of the lists.

On a platform beyond the southern entrance, formed by a natural elevation of the ground, were pitched the pavilions of the challenging knights, while at the northern access to the lists there was a large enclosed space for such knights as might be disposed to engage in combat with the challengers.

This passage-of-arms, as it was called, was to be a general tournament in which all knights fought at once.

On the present occasion there were twelve knights on the side of the challengers, and their opponents would, of course, be restricted to a similar number.

As soon as Prince John had taken his seat, the heralds made proclamations of the rules of the tourney, which was to be maintained with sharp swords and pointed lances, and not with blunted weapons as was the case in more ordinary displays.

The proclamation was finished with their usual cry of "Largesse, largesse, gallant knights!" and gold and silver pieces were showered on them from the galleries, it being a high point of chivalry to exhibit liberality towards those whom the age accounted as the historians of honour.

At length the barriers were opened, and the challenging knights rode into the lists, headed by Beauclerc, who had been chosen as their leader, not by

reason of his superiority to the others in feats of arms, but because he was the giver of the entertainment. Among those who rode with him were Sir Brian Waldemar and Gilbert St. Omer, the latter being a champion whose skill was such that few cared to match themselves against him in single combat.

"Love of ladies, splintering of lances! Stand forth, gallant knights. Fair eyes look upon your deeds!"

Thus shouted the heralds, while the music of the challengers breathed forth wild bursts expressive of defiance.

As the third of these long and high flourishes was concluded, it was answered by a solitary trumpet from the northern end of the lists, and as soon as the barriers were opened the twelve knights who had come to engage in combat with the challengers rode into the enclosure.

They were headed by a knight mounted on a powerful milk-white steed, he himself being arrayed in coal-black armour. The device upon his shield was a length of chain broken asunder, and as his name was unknown, for he wore his visor closed, he was at once dubbed by the spectators as the Knight of the Riven Chain; a few also referring to him as the Black Knight.

He was a conspicuous figure, not only by reason of the colour of the armour which he wore, which was in such strong contrast to the colour of his steed, but also by the fact that in stature and girth of chest there were none there who could be regarded as his equal.

In his train were Leofric the Saxon, Sir Eustace Alleyne, and Sir Arthur Melton, the latter having been previously known as the Grey Knight, on account of the colour of the armour he had worn. Now, however, he was arrayed in a suit of steel armour, richly inlaid with gold.

Prince John frowned when he saw that three, at least, of the Black Knight's companions were firm adherents of King Richard.

"Some of my brother's myrmidons," he muttered. "I shall regard it as a good omen if they are defeated this day. But who is he of the riven chain?"

The courtier to whom the remark was

addressed replied that no one seemed to know who the knight was.

The Black Knight had in the meantime ridden forward and struck with the sharp end of his spear the shield of Beauclerc until it rang again.

This was a notification that the challenge of Sir Henwick Beauclerc and his party of knights had been accepted, and that the combat was to be with the sharp end of the lance as in actual battle.

The heralds now withdrew to their stations, and the opposing parties of knights ranged themselves in a double rank at each end of the lists precisely opposite to each other.

When all were ready the marshal, in a voice of thunder, pronounced the signal words.

"*Laissez aller!*" (Let go! Away!)

The trumpets sounded as he spoke; the spears of the champions were at once lowered and placed in the rests; the spurs were dashed into the flanks of the horses, and the two foremost ranks of each party rushed upon each other at full gallop, meeting in the centre of the lists with a terrific shock.

The rear ranks advanced at a slower pace to sustain the defeated or follow up the success of the victors of their party, as the case might be.

The immediate result of this first encounter was that several knights on each side were dismounted, but those who were able to, quickly regained their feet and closed hand to hand with those of their antagonists who were in a like predicament.

Those knights who still remained mounted, and whose lances had been lost or broken in the fury of the encounter, were now closely engaged with their swords, shouting their warcries the while.

The tumult was presently increased by the advance of the second rank on each side. The followers of the Sheriff of Nottingham shouted: "Beauclerc! Beauclerc! For Nottingham!" The opposite party shouted in answer: "Saint George for England! Liberty! Liberty!" which watchword they assumed as the meaning of the broken chain on their leader's shield.

The Black Knight had naturally sought out the leader of the opposite party during the first onslaught, and the sheriff, who perhaps would sooner have encountered a less powerful opponent, had no choice but to meet him, it being a point of honour that the two leaders should engage each other if possible.

It ended disastrously for Beauclerc, for the lance of the Black Knight struck him so fair upon the helmet that he was hurled to the ground with such force as to cause the blood to gush from his nose and mouth, and he was borne senseless from the lists.

"A good omen for the cause of freedom!" shouted a voice in the crowd. "One tyrant down, another more highly placed may soon follow."

This undoubted allusion to himself at once incensed and alarmed Prince John. He satisfied himself, however, with commanding the men-at-arms who surrounded the lists to at once seize any man who was guilty of creating a disturbance.

Having disposed of Beauclerc so easily, the Black Knight contented himself for some little time with merely directing and advising his party in the conduct of the fight, always beating off with seeming ease those combatants who attacked him, but seldom pursuing his advantage, or taking the initiative in assailing anyone.

Between every pause in the combat were heard the voices of the heralds, exclaiming:

"Fight on, brave knights! Man dies, but glory lives! Fight on; death is better than defeat!"

During this time Sir Eustace Alleyne had more than once endeavoured to single out Sir Brian Waldemar, for a bitter hatred existed between these two, if for no other reason than that Sir Eustace was a staunch adherent of King Richard, while the other was a creature of Prince John's.

Such, however, was the crowd and confusion that during the earlier part of the conflict their efforts to meet were unavailing; but when the field became thinned somewhat they encountered hand to hand, with all the fury that

mortal animosity joined to rivalry of honour could inspire.

Such was the address of each in parrying and striking that neither at first gained any advantage over the other, although the acclamations of the spectators expressed their admiration of their skill.

It happened that at this time the party of the Knight of the Riven Chain had slightly the worst, for the strength and address of Gilbert St. Omer, with another who fought on the opposite flank of Beauclerc's side, had borne down and dispersed those immediately opposed to them.

Finding themselves freed from their immediate antagonists, it occurred to both these knights at the same instant that they would render the most decisive advantage to their party by aiding Sir Brian Waldemar in his contest with his rival.

Turning their horses, therefore, at the same moment, St. Omer spurred against Sir Eustace Alleyne on the one side; and his companion, who rode a grey horse, on the other.

It was utterly impossible that the object of this unequal and unexpected assault could have sustained it, had he not been warned by a general cry from the spectators.

“Beware! beware, Sir Eustace!” was shouted so universally that the knight became aware of his danger, and, striking a full blow at Sir Brian, reined back his steed in the same moment, so as to escape the charge of St. Omer and the knight on the grey horse.

These knights, therefore, their aim being thus eluded, almost ran their horses against each other ere they could stop their career. Recovering their steeds, however, and wheeling them round, they pursued their united purpose of bearing Sir Eustace to the earth.

Nothing could have saved him except the remarkable strength and activity of the noble horse which he bestrode and the masterly horsemanship which the rider displayed.

These combined enabled him for a few minutes to keep at sword's-point his three antagonists, turning and

wheeling with the agility of a hawk upon the wing, keeping his enemies as far separate as he could, and rushing now against the one, now against the other, dealing sweeping blows with his sword, without waiting to receive those which were aimed at him in return.

The Knight of the Riven Chain, being at the further extremity of the lists, had not at first observed the danger in which his follower was placed, but on seeing that he was so hard beset he set spurs to his horse, which was quite fresh, and came to his assistance like a thunderbolt, exclaiming, in a voice like a trumpet call:

“To the rescue! St. George for Merry England!”

It was high time; for while Sir Eustace Alleyne was pressing upon the knight of the grey horse, Sir Brian Waldemar had got nigh to him with his uplifted sword.

But ere the blow could descend the Black Knight dealt a stroke on the head, which, glancing from the polished helmet, lighted with violence scarcely abated on the chamfron of the steed, and Sir Brian Waldemar rolled to the ground, both horse and man equally, stunned by the fury of the blow.

The Black Knight then turned his horse upon him of the grey steed, and his own sword having been broken in his encounter with Beauclerc, he wrenched from the hand of his new opponent the battle-axe which he wielded, and, like one familiar with the use of the weapon, bestowed him such a blow upon the crest that the knight of the grey horse also fell senseless on the field.

Having achieved this double feat, for which he was highly applauded, he returned calmly to the extremity of the lists, leaving Sir Eustace to cope with Gilbert St. Omer.

This was not a matter of great difficulty now. St. Omer's horse had bled much from a wound received in the scrimmage, and gave way under the shock of Sir Eustace Alleyne's charge.

Gilbert St. Omer rolled on the field, encumbered with the stirrup, from which he was unable to draw his foot. His antagonist sprang from horseback, waved his sword over the head of his

adversary, and commanded him to yield himself.

At this moment, Prince John, to save his adherent from the mortification of confessing himself vanquished, cast down his warder, and so put an end to the conflict.

Thus ended the memorable passage of arms at Nottingham, one of the most gallantly contested tournaments of that year. Two knights had died upon the field, and ten were badly wounded.

It being now the duty of Prince John to name the knight who had done best, he determined that the honour of the day remained with the Knight of the Riven Chain.

Through a field encumbered with broken armour and the bodies of slain and wounded horses, the marshals of the lists conducted the victor to the foot of Prince John's throne.

But here a surprise was in store for them.

The Black Knight bestowed a glance upon the prince which caused the latter to start in his seat and flush darkly, although he could only see the stranger's eyes through the bars of his visor.

"I neither claim, nor will I accept, any guerdon as an award for the honours of this tournament," said the Black Knight, in a clear, deep voice. "Choose you then, therefore, from among the other gallant knights a champion who shall receive the chaplet of honour."

With these words, so daring and defiant, he leaped on to his horse and, without deigning another look at the amazed but silent courtiers and prince, rode slowly towards the exit from the lists.

What reply Prince John would have made, or what action he would have taken in the matter, cannot be told, for at this moment a diversion occurred which turned his thoughts into another channel.

From amidst the throng someone called out in a loud voice:

"Beware! Sir Knight of the Riven Chain! Beware of the Red Fox!"

Prince John turned white as a sheet, but he dared not take any action to find out who had shouted the warning.

Beauchero was still lying insensible in his tent, and Sir Brian Waldemar was in little better case, and as these were the only two in the secret of the conspiracy—with the exception of the Red Fox himself—there was no one to whom the prince could turn to for counsel in this dilemma.

The spectators now began to disperse, and the prince, having refused to name another victor, descended from the gallery, mounted his palfrey, and, followed by his courtiers, rode from the field.

A small company of foresters in Lincoln green watched his going.

"By St. Christopher!" said one, who was no other than Will Scarlet, of Robin Hood's band, "but that last remark of thine, good Robin, will go far to spoil the usurper's appetite for dinner."

"That may be," replied the outlaw chief, laughing; "but methinks he will soon receive other news that will leave him no appetite for food whatever, glutton though he be. But we must follow the Black Knight, good comrades, for, by my faith! in thus riding alone he is running into grave danger, and will need some true English hearts and strong English arms to serve him."

CHAPTER 7.

Attacked in the Forest Glades.

It was the morning after the tournament, and the outlaws of Sherwood were all assembled around the trysting-tree in the Harthill Walk, where they had spent the night in refreshing themselves after a long hunt in the forest, some with wine, some with slumber, and some with recounting the events of the past day.

It so chanced that the Black Knight, having missed his road in the winding forest-paths on the previous evening, had sought shelter in the outlaws' camp, and was now Robin Hood's guest.

The morning meal was being prepared, and a savoury odour rose on the air as the luscious buck-steaks were grilled over the red embers of wood-fires, and fish, newly caught from the stream, was cooking on spits or in the pans.

Robin Hood assumed his seat on a

raised mound of turf, and assigned to the Black Knight a seat on his right hand.

"Pardon my freedom, noble sir," he said, "but in these glades I am monarch—they are my kingdom; and these, my wild subjects, would reck but little of my power were I, within my own dominions, to yield place to mortal man—save one."

"And who may this fortunate individual be whom you would thus honour?" asked the Black Knight.

"King Richard of England," replied the outlaw; "for whatever may be said of me to my disadvantage, at least this can be put to my credit—that I am a true subject of his. And may the day not be far distant when he will return to the land from which he has been too long absent."

The Knight of the Riven Chain looked fixedly at the outlaw chief.

"You say truly, worthy outlaw," he exclaimed. "He has been too long absent from the country. But that is a fault, I trow, which can scarcely be laid at his door, since he has been for nigh on two years a prisoner in the dungeon of an Austrian castle."

"From which he hath escaped," said Robin Hood.

"How know you that?"

"I have reason for knowing that what I say is the truth," returned Robin Hood. "I may not say more at present. I have reason to believe also that his life will be in danger if he does not speedily proclaim himself after he has set foot on these shores."

"He is well accustomed to safe danger!" said the Black Knight.

"I speak of danger from the hand of the assassin," pursued Robin Hood.

"You know, then, that there is a plot to take his life? Is that so?"

"An he were here," replied Robin Hood, "I should bid him beware of the Red Fox of Tirlstone!"

"So! It is the warning that was called out to me as I rode from the lists yesterday."

"Because the danger also exists for you," said the outlaw, "you being on the side of King Richard."

"Again, how know you that?"

"Because you are an enemy of Prince John, Sir Knight, as any might judge when you scorned yesterday to receive the prize of victory at his hands."

"You are a keen observer, Robin Hood," said the knight. "But we must find means to run this Red Fox to earth. A truce to these serious matters now, however, for here come two of your henchmen bearing a goodly number of platters. By my faith!" he added, as he presently attacked the viands set before him, "but the fresh, woodland air sharpens the appetite, and you have choice fare here in the forest to satisfy it withal."

"Saint Hubert, the patron saint of hunters and foresters, is good to us," replied Robin Hood, with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

"I dare be sworn he is," said the knight, "and I would also gage my good horse yonder against a handful of oats that the worthy saint also assists you to obtain an occasional runlet of good wine by way of ally to this noble venison steak. 'Twere pity indeed to have to wash it down with water, and that at present is the only liquid I perceive."

Robin Hood laughed heartily, and, calling to Friar Tuck, the latter presently appeared with a leathern bottle, which might contain about three quarts, and two large drinking-cups, made out of the horn of the urus, and hooped with silver.

Robin Hood filled both cups, and handing one to the knight, raised the other on high, saying, in the Saxon fashion:

"Waes Hael, Sir Knight!"

"Drinc Hael, bold outlaw!" answered the knight, raising the goblet to his lips and draining it at a draught, an example which his host followed.

When the repast was finished the foresters assembled to take part in some sylvan sports for the amusement of their guest. Bouts with quarter-staffs, sword-play, cross-bow shooting, and above all, archery with the long-bow—the favourite weapon of the outlaws—were indulged in, and considerable skill was displayed by all the competitors in these manly exercises.

Shortly before noon the Black Knight, having thanked Robin Hood for his entertainment, rose to take his departure.

"There is one other favour that I would fain ask of you before I go," he said, "and that is, that you would provide me with a guide to the Castle of Rutherford, the residence of Sir Arthur Melton; for, of a truth, it was while trying to find the road there that I lost my way in the forest last night."

"Gladly will I do as you desire," replied the outlaw. "There is a man here, a retainer of Leofric the Saxon, who will serve you in that capacity right well. He, too, is on his way to Rutherford, and has but remained with us for an hour to partake of forest cheer. Ho, there! send Bertram the dwarf hither," he called to one of the band.

The broad, squat figure of the Saxon thane's retainer was presently seen crossing the greensward.

"What would you with me?" he asked.

"To guide the Knight of the Riven Chain to Rutherford Castle, whither you are yourself bound," replied Robin Hood.

"That will I blithely," was the response; "an the knight is ready to start at once, for I may not tarry here longer."

"I am ready."

While Little John was saddling the knight's horse, Robin Hood took from his neck the bugle-horn and rich baldric which he wore, and said to him of the Riven Chain:

"Noble knight, if you disdain not to grace by your acceptance a bugle which an English yeoman has once worn, this will I pray you to keep in memory of our meeting; and if it so happens, as it may well do, that ye chance to be hard beset in any forest between Trent and Tees, wind three blasts upon the horn thus"—the outlaw put the bugle to his lips and blew three clear and peculiar notes—"and it may well chance ye shall find helpers and rescue."

"Gramercy for the gift, bold yeoman," said the knight as he accepted

the bugle, "and better help than thine and thy rangers would I never seek, were it at my utmost need."

"Farewell, Sir Knight; it may be that we shall meet again soon."

"It shall be, if all goes well with me," replied the knight as he gripped Robin Hood's hand in token of good fellowship.

Then, mounting upon his strong war-horse, he rode off through the forest, followed by Bertram the dwarf, on a stout palfrey, nearly as squat and square as himself:

For some time the strangely-assorted pair rode on in silence, the knight deep in his own thoughts, which his guide did not venture to interrupt.

The visor of the knight's helmet was raised, in order to admit freedom of breath, but the beaver, or under-part, was closed, so that his features could be but imperfectly distinguished. But his ruddy, embrowned cheek-bones could be plainly seen, and the large and bright blue eyes that flashed from under the dark shade of the raised visor. The whole gesture and look of the champion expressed careless gaiety and fearless confidence; a mind with which danger was a familiar thought, as with one whose trade was war and adventure.

When they had ridden a little more than half a league the Black Knight slackened his pace somewhat, so as to allow his companion to come up with him. He then engaged the dwarf in conversation, asking about his master Leofric, about the state of the lands and the peasantry, the manner in which the barons of that district treated their vassals, and many other questions which Bertram answered at length or shortly, as best suited his peculiar humour at the moment.

"'Tis a goodly horn that hangs at your baldric, Sir Knight," observed Bertram, breaking a pause in the conversation. "One would think almost that you had it in your mind to turn forester."

"Well, surely one might do worse than that, worthy Bertram," laughed the knight.

"Marry, 'tis true. But I would fain

know if the horn was a gift from Robin Hood?"

"It was. 'Tis a pledge of his good will, though I am not like to need it. Three blasts on this bugle will, I am assured, bring round at our need a band of yonder honest yeomen."

"Were it not that the gift is a pledge of their friendship," replied the dwarf, "I would say Heaven forfend. 'Tis not always an advantage to meet the merry outlaws of Sherwood; and yet, after all, there be companions who are far more dangerous for travellers to meet than the bold foresters."

"And who may they be?"

"Well, to begin with, there are the Free Companions who ride with the Red Fox of Tirlstone," said the dwarf, "and, though they be followers of a fox, they might more truly be likened to wolves. An we meet a band of them we are like to pay dearly for it. Now, I pray you, Sir Knight, an we were attacked by a number of these villains, what would you do? Would you not remember Robin Hood's horn?"

"What! Sound for aid?" exclaimed the knight. "Against a score of such rascally miscreants as those you speak of, whom one good knight could drive before him as the wind drives the withered leaves?"

"Nay, then," said Bertram, "I will pray you for a close sight of that same horn, which might, an the need arose, be used to such good account."

The knight undid the clasp of the baldric, and indulged the whim of his fellow traveller, who immediately hung the bugle round his own neck.

"Tra-lira-la," he whistled. "Nay, I know the notes as well as any bold outlaw among them."

"Restore me the bugle, knave," said the knight.

"Content you, Sir Knight, it is in safe keeping," said the dwarf. "Tis better that I should wear it in the forest, and restore it to you when we are safely in Rutherford Castle."

"This exceedeth your licence!" exclaimed the knight angrily. "Beware you tamper not with my patience!"

"Urge me not with violence, Sir Knight," said the dwarf, keeping at a

distance from the impatient champion, "or, beshrew me, I will show a clean pair of heels, and leave you to find your way through the wood alone."

"Nay, you have hit me there," said the knight, "and, sooth to say, I am not in the mood to jangle with you. Keep the horn an you will, but let us proceed on our journey."

"You will not harm me, then?" said Bertram.

"On my knightly word, no."

"Tis enough. And now that the horn is safely in my keeping, 'twould be as well, Sir Knight, that you loosen your sword in its sheath, for, if I mistake not, there are company in yonder thicket that are on the lookout for one of us, and it will scarce be me."

The knight cast a swift glance in the direction indicated, and what he saw there caused him to at once close his visor and draw his sword.

Not a moment too soon, for several arrows struck his helmet next instant and a score of men dashed from the bushes to attack him.

Bertram, the dwarf, sounded Robin Hood's bugle right lustily, and then, ranging himself by his companion's side, prepared to give battle to the would-be assassins.

The men came on, acting under the orders of a mounted man in red armour, who urged them to make short work of the Black Knight and his dwarf companion.

Easier said than done, for the knight with his sword and Bertram with his heavy club laid several of their assailants low at the first onset.

Suddenly the knight in the red armour—who was no other than the Red Fox of Tirlstone—discharged an arrow direct at the Black Knight's horse. It was a fatal shot, for the noble brute, uttering a scream of agony, staggered and fell to the ground.

"Coward!" cried its rider as he sprang clear and continued the fight on foot, still ably supported by Bertram.

The latter was also dismounted the next moment, and the two valiants then backed to the broad trunk of an oak-tree and in that position fought with the fury of desperation.

Many were the blows which they received, but none so far had caused a serious wound, while at least six of the Red Fox's men lay dead or wounded upon the ground.

Numbers must have told in the next few minutes, however, in the absence of help. But help came in the nick of time. The bugle-call of alarm had been heard by Robin Hood and his outlaw archers, and suddenly a cloud of grey-goose shafts which found many victims showed that the heroes of Sherwood were once more at hand to aid the right and vanquish villainy.

"Robin Hood to the rescue! Liberty or death! Down with the Red Fox!"

Such was the cry as the outlaws burst into the glade.

That was enough. The Red Fox and his hirelings—those who survived, that is—scattered and fled into the bushes like scared rabbits, Robin and his merry men following hot upon their heels.

CHAPTER 8.

"Long Live the King!"

STERN was the chase, but in the end Robin Hood had to call his men in. He returned with them to where the Black Knight still waited with Bertram the dwarf.

The Black Knight's first concern was to know whether Gaston Malvoisin, the Red Fox, had been captured; and when he was told that the villain had eluded the foresters his brow grew dark with rage.

"'Tis shame that so great a miscreant should go free," he said. "But I thank you, my gallant friends, for your timely help," he added, speaking with a dignity which they had not observed in his former bearing, which hitherto had seemed rather that of a blunt, bold soldier. "But tell me, Robin Hood, have you any idea where the miscreants are flying to? 'Twould

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be useless to follow them direct, on foot; but if you know their haunts—”

“I know their haunts well, Sir Knight,” answered the outlaw chief. “Amid the Tirlstone Hills shall we run the fox to earth, though whether he and his band will go now straight to their haunts is more than I can guess.”

“Twould be the natural thing for them to do,” said the Black Knight. “A wounded fox ever makes for his hole.”

“By Saint Dunstan!” cried the burly friar, “but the Red Fox of Tirlstone, as he is called, is wilier than any of the four-footed breed, and I doubt me whether he will make for his earth just yet.”

“We must follow in his tracks,” said Robin Hood. “By so doing we shall come up with him in time, though some days may pass ere that happens.”

“It will not be an easy matter to track him now that the ground is so hard and dry,” said the Black Knight.

“If it were but one man we were tracking, it would be difficult, I grant,” answered Robin Hood; “but in this case we shall be following a number, who, even on the hardest ground, cannot fail to leave a trail, however light, behind them. Moreover, we have men among my followers who are skilful in tracking the tread of man or horse. There is Clement of Hexamstow, who was at one time wont to trace the Tynedale and Teviotdale thieves as a bloodhound follows the slot of a hurt deer. And Little John and a score of others, myself included, know each glade and dingle, copse and highwood, betwixt this and Tirlstone.”

“Tis well!” exclaimed the knight. “Let us lose no time, then, but set off at once.”

“It will not be possible, Sir Knight,” said Robin Hood, “for you to keep pace with us walking, while clad in your heavy armour.”

This was certainly the fact, for armour is but ill adapted for walking in. But, as it chanced, one of the outlaws presently brought in a horse which he had caught straying in the forest.

As the saddle and bridle were on it all complete, it was evident that it had

belonged to one of the Red Fox’s men, who had either been wounded or slain in the recent fight.

Although by no means to be compared with the gallant steed which the Knight of the Riven Chain had lost, it was still a sufficiently sturdy animal, and would serve until he could get one more suitable.

As soon as he had swung himself into the saddle, the Black Knight started, accompanied by a strong band of the outlaws, to follow after the retreating forces of Gaston Malvoisin, the Red Fox of Tirlstone.

It is needless to describe the passage of the Black Knight and Robin Hood, with the gallant company of archers, through the forest, now turning this way, now that, anon almost doubling on their tracks as they followed the Red Fox to his lair.

It was on the afternoon of the third day that they at length ran him to earth at Tirlstone.

“By my faith!” exclaimed the Black Knight as he surveyed the surrounding landscape, “but the rogue has chosen a pleasant enough place for his headquarters, and strong withal. Yonder hill, with the ruins on it, should be capable of good defence.”

The knight’s opinion of the place was certainly well warranted by the facts.

There could surely have been few more beautiful or striking scenes in the whole shire than was presented to their view as they came to a halt. The soft and gentle River Don swept through an amphitheatre in which broad stretches of grass country were richly blended with woodland. On a mount, ascending from the river, rose the ruins of an old Danish castle, which had been destroyed on the Norman invasion. The walls of the inner keep stood intact, however, and in some measure the ruins had been made habitable, either by adding slanting roofs here and there, where it was possible to do so, or building a wall of stonework across some of the angles of the outer fortifications, thus forming rude but strongly-built huts, sufficiently protected to provide a warm or dry living-place during cold and inclement weather.

A considerable open space at the foot of this hill seemed formerly to have been dedicated to the rites of Druidical superstition, for in the centre of the glade there still remained part of a circle of rough, unhewn stones, of large dimensions.

Seven stood upright; the rest had been dislodged from their places, probably by the zeal of some convert to Christianity, and lay, some prostrate near their former site, and others piled up into a sort of barricade at some little distance away.

"How many are there, should you say, in the Red Fox's band?" asked the knight of Robin Hood.

"Five score at least," replied the outlaw captain, "when all are collected."

"And we are three score?"

"Yes."

"They have, too, the vantage of position," pursued the Black Knight; "and I perceive that they have so rebuilt some of the old walls of the ruined castle, and made other dispositions of the means of defence at their command, as to render yonder hill and the stonework which crowns it a formidable place to attack."

"You would counsel prudence, Sir Knight?" said Robin Hood, in some surprise, for the Knight of the Riven Chain had hitherto shown himself rather more reckless than prudent when taking part in any combat.

"I would counsel no rashness," replied the knight; "for I would not wish that the Red Fox should escape us this time. He and his followers must fight on foot on the hill, but we must not forget that they possess horses, and if they find the day going against them, will try to make good their retreat."

"Their horses are picketed in the wood yonder," replied Robin Hood, pointing to a thicket on the left of the eminence. "I will despatch a party under Clement the scout to set them loose."

"Av, do so."

A few minutes later half a score of men, under the skilful guidance of Clement, quitted the main body, and for several hundred yards retraced their

steps to the rear. Then they swerved very slightly to the right, and presently disappeared amid the trees.

From that moment until the horses were set loose and driven off, about half an hour later, they vanished as completely from sight as though they had been swallowed up by the earth.

"By the bones of Saint Hubert!" exclaimed the Black Knight, "but the Red Fox and his followers hide themselves well in their burrows. Not even so much as a head have I seen yet."

"But they are there," said Robin Hood; "and I would caution you, Sir Knight, not to expose yourself too freely. 'Twould be as well if we got to the shelter of the Druid stones."

The words had scarcely left his lips when a bolt from a cross-bow came singing through the air, striking the Black Knight full on the breastplate, with such force that he fairly reeled in his saddle.

Fortunately the bolt did not penetrate the toughened steel of his armour, but it left a dent that would need the services of a smith to take out.

"To cover! to cover!" shouted Robin Hood. "Be ready with your arrows! The Red Fox is aroused!"

The next instant the fight commenced.

It began with flights of arrows and cross-bow bolts from either side, but as the outlaws were by far the more skilful archers, their enemies suffered rather heavily at that early stage of the combat.

Not a head or a limb could be shown over the ruined walls or breastworks for an instant but that it was pierced by a cloth-yard shaft.

Suddenly a wild clamour arose among them. They had discovered the loss of their horses. They realised now that it would be a fight to the death.

Then they did a mad thing, although, it has to be admitted, a brave thing also, for led by Gaston Malvoisin in person, they forsook their cover and rushed down the slope of the hill to attack the yeomen, who were now strongly posted within the charmed circle of the Druidical remains.

By Robin Hood's orders, his men held

their positions behind the barriers of stone, and as soon as the enemy were close at hand a counterblast of arrows sped again and again, carrying death in their flight.

But the Red Fox riders—if they could still be so termed, being now horseless—closed at a run upon the barrier, and slingng their cross-bows behind them, or, in some instances, slingng them away, drew their swords and hurled themselves upon their foes.

Then followed an obstinate and deadly struggle, hand-to-hand.

The assailants, wielding their falchions with one hand, strove with the other to drag down the structure of the barricade. On the other side, the parts were reversed, and the defenders exposed themselves like madmen to protect their ramparts.

So for some minutes the contest raged almost in silence, friend and foe falling one upon another.

Some of the great topmost stones of the barricade had been overthrown during the struggle, reducing the whole fabric to about half its original height.

The loss had been heavy on both sides, and Robin Hood, noting that the attack was not being pushed with such vigour as at first, ordered his men to sally forth and hurl back their foes.

"Drive them back to their earth!" he cried. "Sword and axe! hack and hew! 'Tis their last fight, for we will master them!"

A ringing shout was the answer to this encouragement, and the outlaws flung themselves over the barricades, making wild work in the close ranks of their enemies.

Conspicuous even among this gathering of staunch fighters were three men, for the havoc which they wrought.

This trio was Little John, Friar Tuck, and Bertram the dwarf. For once the burly friar had discarded his favourite weapon, the quarter-staff, and armed himself, like Little John, with a mighty axe. But Bertram the dwarf still clung to his great club with the lead-weighted end.

This redoubtable trio, side by side and shoulder to shoulder, fought with such tremendous fury that their adver-

saries fairly reeled before their onslaught; terror seized them in its grip, and a cry going up that these were surely more than mortal men, the followers of the Red Fox began to break up in disorder and flee towards the shelter of their ruined castle on the hill.

In the meantime the Black Knight had not been idle.

With a great sword, such as few men could wield for any length of time, he very soon cleared a space around him, which was littered with the dead and wounded bodies of his foes. But he cared naught to exchange cut and thrust with the ordinary men-at-arms, for all the time that he fought he was striving his utmost to reach Gaston Malvoisin, whom he could see in the centre of the fighting-line.

The men of Tirlstone gave way before the terrible sword of the Knight of the Riven Chain, despite all their leader's efforts to rally them.

Fierce, unscrupulous, steeped in crime as Gaston Malvoisin was, no one could deny that he had courage.

Face to face, at close quarters, at last he met the Black Knight, and fighting hand-to-hand, the air rang with the furious blows which they dealt each other.

At length Malvoisin received a blow which, though its force was partly parried by his shield, descended yet with such violence on his crest that he fell with a crash to the earth, where he lay motionless.

"Yield ye, Gaston Malvoisin," said the knight, stooping over him and holding against the bars of his helmet the fatal poniard with which the knights dispatched their enemies, and which was called the dagger of mercy—"yield thee, Malvoisin, rescue or no rescue, or thou art but a dead man!"

"I will not yield," replied the Red Fox faintly, "to an unknown conqueror. Tell me thy name."

"You already know it," said the Black Knight sternly; "for you have been set on treacherously to take my life!"

"And I have lost my own in the attempt," said Malvoisin. "My hours

are numbered. Richard of England, I will not crave your forgiveness, for I do not deserve it."

"What urged you to so foul an undertaking?" demanded King Richard, for the Black Knight was no other than that famous monarch, who since he had set foot in England, not many days previously, had been wandering in search of adventure like a true knight-errant, careless of his own safety. Perchance, also, with a view of discovering who were trustworthy and who the reverse, among the powerful barons who held vast estates in the country.

King Richard repeated his question. "What urged you to so foul an undertaking?"

"Revenge!" was the reply.

And with that word Gaston Malvoisin sank back dead.

With his death the fight concluded. Beaten, disorganised, flying for their lives before the victorious archers, his one-time followers scattered in all directions, leaving more than half their number dead or wounded on the field.

"Recall your brave foresters, Robin Hood," said Cœur-de-Lion, addressing the gallant chief, who, having been wounded in the affray, was having his arm bound up by one of his men. "The Red Fox is no more, and without a leader his band can never reunite. It is dismembered, and henceforth will be unable to work any evil."

"I would fain have hunted them down until we had swept the countryside entirely clear of them," replied Robin Hood; "but that I judge I listen to a voice whose behests must not be disputed."

So saying, he wound a long, clear blast upon his horn that echoed and re-echoed in the wooded heights, and amid the old grey walls of the ruined castle. It was the signal of recall.

"Thou bearest an English heart, gallant Robin Hood," said the Black Knight, "and well dost judge you are bound to obey my behest—I am Richard of England!"

At these words, pronounced in a tone of majesty suited to the high rank and no less distinguished character of Cœur-de-Lion, the outlaws at once kneeled

down before him and tendered their allegiance.

"Rise, my friends, for such in good truth I may call you," said Richard graciously; "you have rendered me loyal service, and though you are outlaws I have no truer subjects in the land. Arise, for I have much yet to perform, and it may well be that I shall need your help again."

"You may count on us, my liege," replied Robin Hood, "wherever and whenever you may require us. But there is a matter for which I have to crave your pardon—"

"And that is?"

"I have known since ever I saw you at the tournament that you were King Richard of England, and there may have been times when I have seemed to address you with undue familiarity. But as it was evidently your wish that for the time being you should be known only as a simple knight, I deemed it best that I should not betray my knowledge of your real rank by my bearing towards you when in the presence of others."

"You did right," said Cœur-de-Lion, "and it is not needful that you should ask pardon for having acceded to my unspoken wishes. And now, good Robin, when the wounded have been attended to, we must dally no longer in this place."

"Where to next, my liege?"

"To Nottingham, with what haste we may, lest the other traitors escape us."

* * * * *

Prince John had quitted Nottingham, attended by only a few barons, and was hastily pursuing his journey towards York.

Sir Henwick Beauolerc, the dastardly sheriff, was confined to his bed, still weak from the wounds he had received at the tournament, and many of his guests had departed. But Sir Brian Waldemar still remained, anxious for news from the Red Fox as to whether their dastardly plot against the king had been successful or not.

The drawbridge of the castle had been lowered to enable Waldemar and a number of retainers to ride out into the town, but while he was still in the court-

yard there sounded a clattering of horses' hoofs, and ere the drawbridge could be raised the Black Knight crossed it, followed by several barons and a number of men-at-arms. At the same instant a hundred archers, headed by Robin Hood, who appeared so suddenly that it almost seemed they had risen out of the ground, ascended the castle hill and followed the men-at-arms into the courtyard.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded a knight, who was acting for Beauclerc during the latter's illness. "How dare outlawed men enter here so boldly—"

King Richard waved him aside, and, turning to one of his attendants, said briefly:

"Melton, do thine office!"

A knight stepped forward, and, laying his hand on the shoulder of Sir Brian Waldemar, said:

"I arrest you for high treason!"

"Who dares to arrest a knight within the precincts of this castle without my authority?" demanded he who was acting for the Sheriff of Nottingham. "And by whose authority is this bold outrage offered?"

"I make the arrest," replied the knight. "I, Sir Arthur Melton, High Constable of England."

"And he arrests Brian Waldemar," said the king, raising his visor, "by the order of Richard Cœur-de-Lion, here present. And look to it that no one makes resistance, or, by the splendour of heaven, there will be a terrible reckoning. Brian Waldemar, traitor, and assassin in intent if not in deed, your doom is sealed."

Robin Hood raised his cap and waved it thrice, and a thunderous shout broke forth from the gallant foresters there assembled.

"Long live the king! Long live Richard of England!"

THE END.

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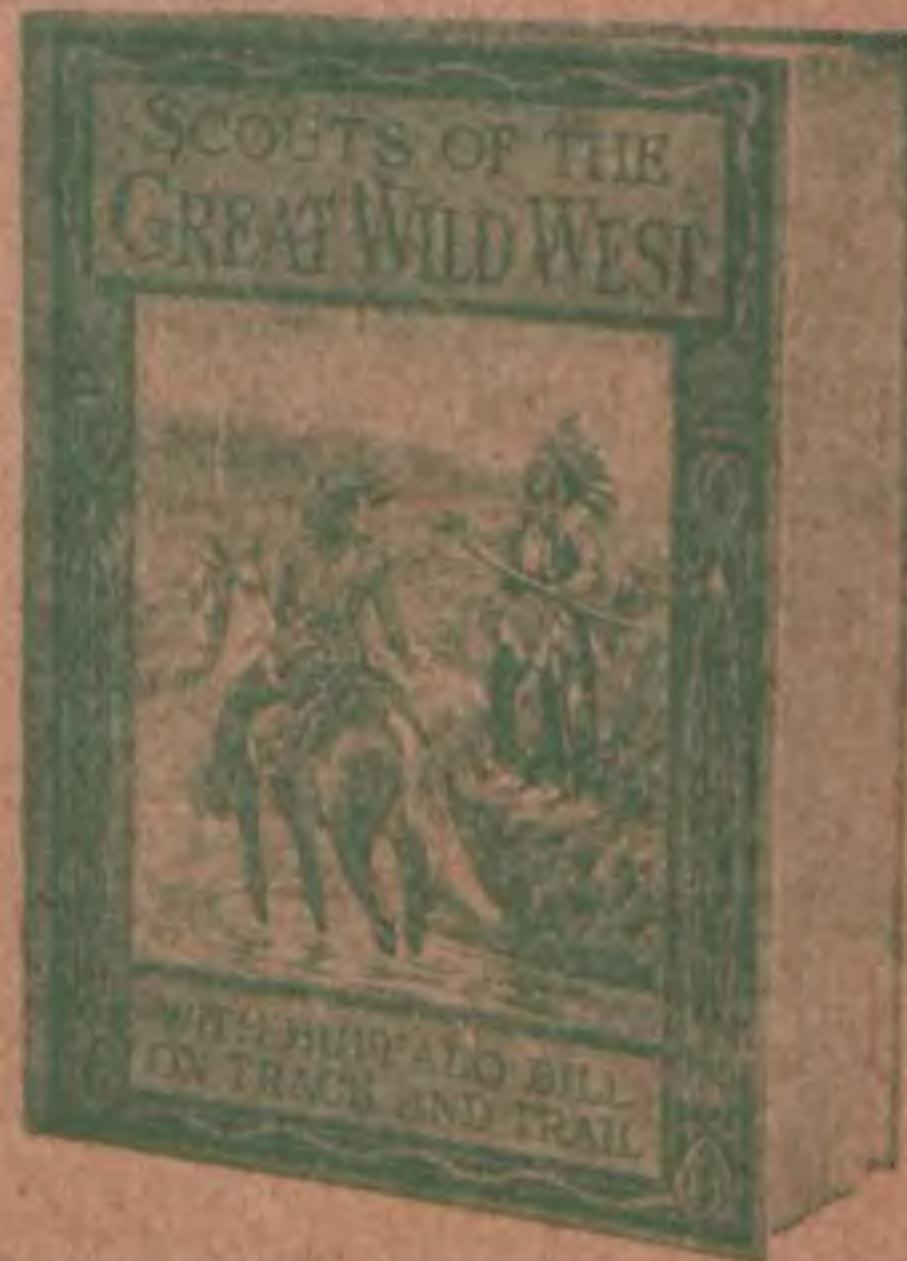
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